

# **A Textual Analysis of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*: Words in Letters and Letters in Words**

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**by Samuel John Stump - National Portrait Gallery**

## **The Original Goth Girl**

A “Goth Girl” is one with pale skin, dyed black or red hair who is interested in things of a dark and morbid or mysterious nature such as: cemeteries, death, creatures of the night (bats, owls etc.), and vampires (De La Morte 1). Mary Shelley is the original Goth Girl. The masterpiece *Frankenstein; or, the Modern Prometheus* is a literary house of mirrors: blurring lines and boundaries, and exploring liminal space. The characters are formed with a pen, molded deftly into shapes like promethean men, and thrown into a fire to melt together into something resembling a box of crayons on a hot summer afternoon. Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley structured *Frankenstein* as a story within a story depicting the union of science and literature, and The Monster as the symbolic love child of science and man.

## **Epistolary Structure and Polar Exploration**

The epistolary structure was a popular novel framework in the nineteenth century. Created of letters, and by letters, this structure of written correspondence is a conversation between two people: Robert Walton and his sister Margret Saville. Letter one serves as the exposition to the novel revealing much about the writer who wields the pen. Captain Walton recalls his early childhood and explains his passion for the sea, and reveals his innermost desire: "I shall satiate my ardent curiosity with the sight of a part of the world never before visited, and may tread a land never before imprinted by the foot of man" (Shelley 7). This romantic pursuit is the dream of a man who longs to make history by discovering the Norther Passage.

In a dramatic attempt to lay claim to his possible martyrdom as a failed Arctic explorer, he explains that he will not see his sister Margret for months or years if he succeeds and "soon or never" if he fails (Shelley 9). While he continues his reflections, he recalls a period when he "pursued, for the first time, those poets whose effusions entranced my soul, and lifted it to Heaven. I also became a poet, and for one year lived in a Paradise of my own creation," leaving the reader with more questions than answers (Shelley 8). The framing of this narrative cloaks the tale in a shroud of mystery,

In *"A Paradise of My Own Creation": Frankenstein and the Improbable Romance of Polar Exploration*, Jessica Richard asserts that there is "something arresting about the easy transition Walton remembers making between reading travel narratives and reading and writing poetry" (Richard 295). Further asserting that Walton "seeks paradise through poetry and then through travel narratives," but also through the belief in finding a "lost paradise" (Richard 295).

When Walton dreams of the "phenomena of the heavenly bodies," (aurora borealis) and a land of "perpetual splendor," he is referring to a popular myth among mariners: the belief that an undiscovered "lost paradise" exists in the "land of eternal light," somewhere in the uncharted

land of the frozen expanse of the far north (Shelley 7). According to Richard "few of the Polar explorers whose narratives Walton is supposed to have read, share his belief in a hyperborean Eden, they do search for a fantastical paradise...an open navigable sea over the North Pole" (Richard 296).

While the dubiously crafted letters do not contain a precise year, Richard's research places Walton's epistolary narrative in the 1790's. "Walton has plotted his course from northern Russia, where the British made their first attempt at a Northern Passage in 1554. The voyage inaugurated English trade with Russia when the crew of one ship took refuge in the port of Arkhangelsk" (Richard 297). It is noted that Walton's voyage follows a historically accurate route of exploration for this era of exploration. (Richard 297).

Richard explains that Mary Shelley, an avid reader of travel journals, was quite familiar with the popular quest to find a Northern Passage. She asserts that "Shelley decided to add a polar frame narrative sometime between September 1816 and April 1817" (Richard 296). Barrow's quest was publicized "in articles in the Quarterly Review, beginning in the October 1816 issue (published Feb. 1817; Shelley notes reading the Quarterly on May 29 & 30 1817" (Richard 297). She also notes reading "a book-length study, *Chronological History of Voyages into Arctic Region* (1818)" (Richard 297). The union of science and literature contribute to the Romantic nature of *Frankenstein*.

In letter IV, Walton records two separate sightings of creatures traveling by dog sledge across the frozen tundra. Miraculously, the captain's prayers for a companion may have been answered! After conversing with the crew, the captain arrives, and the half-frozen, emaciated Victor Frankenstein queries, "Will you have the kindness to inform me whither you are bound?" and the captain replies, "We are on a voyage of discovery," and without hesitation, Frankenstein

climbs aboard sparking the unanticipated brotherhood between Walter and the scientist (Shelley 14). Walton's passionate pursuit of the pole is a mirror image of Victor's passionate pursuit of creation.

In "Creator and Created in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*," Naomi Heatherington identifies the parallel qualities of Walton and Frankenstein who "defy only their earthly fathers, one in continuing to study alchemy in secret, the other in following a sea-faring career" (Heatherington 7). Elucidating that by using the mirroring of Satan's rejection by God in *Paradise Lost* and Frankenstein's reaction to his creature, Shelley depicts the Christian deity as an abusive parent who, in Shelley's terms, 'made man such as he is and damned him for being so'" (Heatherington 15).

"Frankenstein and Polar Exploration," explains that during the time of Barrow's conquests for the pole, the jargon of Polar exploration was pregnant with terms of sexual connotation such as "penetration," the "zone of the marvelous", and fissures in the polar ice that would "open up to English prows to reveal liquid warmth" (Richard 301). The use of Walton as a mirror to Barrow is most likely satire on Shelley's part. (Richard 303). Barrow believed that successful polar exploration would "unite the classes -- from literary men to merchants to monarch" (Richard 303). Shelley, being a feminist, would have been critical of the masculine language of conquest and the romanticizing of Polar exploration.

### **Victor's Romance and the Unloved Love Child**

When Victor arrives at the University of Ingolstadt, to pursue his love of science, he meets two mentors, Krempe and Waldman. Initially, Professor Waldman, meaning man of the woods or nature (translated from German), is described as "short, but remarkably erect" (Shelley 28). Waldman confides in young Mr. Frankenstein that these philosophers "penetrate into the

recesses of Nature and shew how she works in her hiding places"(Shelley 29). The sexual innuendo is hyperbolic and reminiscent of a different type of romance novel at times.

Shelley's diction contains a passionate and sexual tone throughout Chapter 3, in the descriptions of Victor's dark explorations. In my close reading of the text, I omitted every word that did not have a sexual connotation. The first paragraph symbolically represents the courtship stage of the romance and includes phrases such as "intrinsic love...fully entered...exclusively pursued...ardent and eager... light of morning...still engaged" (Shelley 30).

Paragraph two contains the following words and phrases which on one level can refer to a 'feverish pursuit of knowledge;' and simultaneously describe sexual discovery:

*closely...conceived...rapidly...ardour...astonishment...proficiency...  
masters... with a sly smile... heartfelt exultation...engaged heart and soul ...in  
pursuit of...discoveries...experienced...conceive...enticements...to know...discovery  
and wonder...closely pursues...must infallibly arrive...attainment of one object..  
pursuit...solely...procured... great...admiration...I had arrived (Shelley 30-31).*

Of the thirteen paragraphs in Chapter 3, each one corresponds to the figurative union of Frankenstein representing Man and Waldman representing science. The sexual phrases within the text reveal a hidden tale just as the story of Frankenstein resides within a larger framework. Commencing with the infatuation or courtship stage of this love affair, the chapter builds up to the stage of climax in paragraph 8:

*pursued...with unremitting ardour.. .cheek...pale...on the very  
brink...failed...clung to hope...realize...one secret...I alone possessed...dedicated  
myself... midnight labours...with unrelaxed and breathless eagerness, I pursued  
nature to her hiding places...conceive...secret toil...trembled...eyes  
swim...resistless...frantic impulse...urged me ...sensation...pursuit...passing  
trance...renewed acuteness...unnatural stimulus...tremendous secrets...solitary*

*chamber...filthy creation...turn with loathing..urged on by eagerness...perpetually increased...conclusion (Shelley 33).*

Victor's midnight labours are unearthing some feelings of guilt regarding his father who might represent Victor's conscience. The chapter culminates with Victor contemplating his recent irresponsible and inconsiderate behavior. Discussing the masculine nature of conquest, penetration and possession, in *Frankenstein and Polar Exploration*, Richard states "M. Waldman aligns modern scientific enquiry with sexual conquest (and gynecological mastery) (Richard 301). The union will result in the birth of the "love child" of man and science: an abomination, a failed experiment, and a politically inspired commentary by Mary Shelley.

The last paragraph symbolically represents Frankenstein's pregnancy:

*"labours...blossom...expanding...every night...oppressed... fever...nervous...most painful degree...disease...regretted...hitherto enjoyed...most excellent health...boasted...firmness of my nerves...symptoms...creation...complete" (Shelley 35).*

Victor will soon give birth to his creature and will be appalled to see his dark side incarnated. The creation of the Monster forces Victor to acknowledge his sins and pushes him to the brink of insanity. Elizabeth Goldhammer, in "The Queer and the Creepy: Homosexual Desire in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*," asserts that the Creature is a manifestation of his creator's sexual identity. "The doubling reveals Victor's paradoxical relationship with his repressed sexuality: he manifests it through the act of creation, the immediately shuns this representation" (Goldhammer 2) Frankenstein's own conscience is responsible for the ugliness or the hideous countenance of his "beautiful" creation.

As the tale is relayed to Walton, Victor has traveled to the ends of the earth in pursuit of the creature "to emphasize Victor's oscillating repulsion of and attraction to

his culturally deviant sexuality” (Goldhammer 2). The evidence suggests that the daemon is the sexually repressed side of Frankenstein's personality, perhaps physically and symbolically, in the unnatural world of gothic fiction where every level is mirrored by another, and every reality is another fiction.

The voice of the narrator never changes throughout *Frankenstein*, and it is written by one hand. The initials of Margaret Walton Saville are the same as Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley. In "The Spectacle of Masculinity," Bette London alludes to the use of Percy Shelley's pseudonym "Victor" (London 392). So as Mary is writing under the pseudonym of Percy, Margaret is writing under the pseudonym of her brother, Robert; Hence, Mary's proclamation that she had written a "ghost story," refers to the narrative "ghost writers" in this "ghost story." *Or maybe...* Walton's ship is a "ghost ship" and every character on board a specter living in an ethereal realm between death and life on the ghostly frozen Arctic Sea ( *It could happen!* ).

The story is told through a virtual kaleidoscope of angular shapes and changing colors. As it turns, we see the images through the lens of rolling colored glass. Reality, as we see it, is told by a mad man, penned by a sea captain, and mailed to a specter, a mere name on a letter. The structure effectually nullifies the existence of truth or fiction. If no detail can be asserted as truth, then everything must be viewed through the same color lens.

The blurring of the boundaries through letters and words, words and letters, leaves the reader searching, forever onward...looking for that magical place, of magnificent splendour, like the aurora borealis, in the land of eternal light, the lost paradise where everything in *Frankenstein*... so rapidly, after great labour, and unremitting eagerness... comes together, and finally... at last, we will conceive it, all at once!

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